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SUBJECT: MEDIA REACTION: U.S.-CHINA NAVY SHIPS CONFRONTATION

Summary: Taiwan's major Chinese-language dailies focused March 17 news coverage on the largest-ever group of Chinese tourists coming to Taiwan Monday, on the island's economic prospects, and on the controversy caused by the alleged anti-Taiwan remarks by a Toronto-based Government Information Office official. In terms of editorials and commentaries, a column in the mass-circulation "Apple Daily" discussed the recent confrontation between USNS Impeccable and several Chinese vessels in the South China Sea. The article said such incidents between China and the United States are expected, as both sides have huge strategic conflicts in the area. An editorial in the conservative, pro-unification, English-language "China Post" said the incident "will further stimulate a naval arms race in the region," but "it would not have a major impact on ties between the two countries." An editorial in the pro-independence, English-language "Taipei Times" discussed the PLA Navy's mission in the Gulf of Aden to combat piracy, saying it is "contributing to the transformation of the PLA Navy from a coastal defense force to one capable of operating offensively at long range and for an extended period of time." A separate "Taipei Times" op-ed, written by Hawaii-based freelance writer Richard Halloran, however, said the navy ships confrontation between the United States and China "was far more than a skirmish at sea," and instead, it "has turned into an early test for US President Barack Obama, who is scheduled to meet Chinese President Hu Jintao at the G20 economic summit meeting in London next month." End summary.

A) "China-U.S. Collision"

Columnist Antonio Chiang wrote in his column in the mass-circulation "Apple Daily" [circulation: 520,000] (3/17):

"The U.S.-China relations have grown more intimate in the wake of the financial storm; the U.S. secretary of state and the Chinese foreign minister both received the best treatment when they visited each other's country. Yet the confrontation between a U.S. ocean surveillance ship, USNS Impeccable, and the Chinese vessels occurred near Hainan in such a harmonious atmosphere [recently]. In reality, such incidents happened all the time, which is not surprising at all. ... Here [i.e. Hainan] is the strategic base where China is building its blue-water navy and nuclear submarines, and the reason why U.S. fighter jets and submarines show up irregularly here is thus quite evident. This incident happened when China's National People's Congress and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference were in session, and it happened right before the Chinese foreign minister was about to visit the United States. The political signal revealed by this incident was particularly thought-provoking.

"Such an incident is in reality expected, because it is unlikely that the U.S. will easily give up its control over the South China Sea. China, on the other hand, not only regards the Nansha [Islands] as its territorial waters, but it also views the South China Sea as a gateway for its rise. Both sides have huge strategic conflicts in this area. But the two sides have also accumulated quite a few experiences in dealing with such incidents. ..."

B) "U.S. PRC Navy Ships: The Game Is on"

The conservative, pro-unification, English-language "China Post" [circulation: 30,000] editorialized (3/17):

"The U.S. Navy has dispatched a guided-missile destroyer to the South China Sea after Chinese ships 'harassed' an American ship operating there 10 days ago. ... The People's Liberation Army is building what will become China's biggest submarine base in Hainan. That has alarmed the United States, Japan and other countries in the region, so the Impeccable was sent there to gather information. ...

"The PLA Navy has become more aggressive since last year. Besides setting up the Hainan base, it began a deployment of three vessels to escort Chinese ships in pirate-infested waters off Somalia, sailing through Japan's Tsugaru Strait to the Pacific Ocean for the first time. ... The incident will further stimulate a naval arms race in the region. But obviously it would not have a major impact on ties between the two countries. The U.S. needs China's cooperation and money to deal with the global financial crisis. But it is a subtle sign that the two still lack fundamental confidence in each other despite greater cooperation in many fields."

C) "A New Role for the PLA Navy?"

The pro-independence, English-language "Taipei Times" [circulation: 30,000] editorialized (3/17):

"Military analysts have been slowly coming to grips with Beijing's decision in December to dispatch naval forces to the Gulf of Aden to combat piracy - China's first deployment of such forces abroad since the 15th century. China's decision was part of its goal to play a role commensurate with its status as a 'great power,' US National

War College professor Bernard Cole said on March 4 during testimony before the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission. Aside from considerations of image - a show of force to consolidate the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) grip on power - the mission was meant to safeguard China's international interests. Furthermore, by participating in a UN-sanctioned, multinational effort to combat piracy at sea, China is sending a signal that it is willing to - and now capable of - being a responsible stakeholder. By interacting with naval forces of other countries, making port calls abroad and securing transit agreements, China is strengthening the image of a 'peaceful rise' and 'peaceful development' advocated by Chinese President Hu Jintao and other Chinese leaders. What this mission also tells us is that for the first time, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy is capable of sustaining task group operations outside its waters for an extended period of time. ...

"There is no doubt that the Gulf of Aden mission is contributing to the transformation of the PLA Navy from a coastal defense force to one capable of operating offensively at long range and for an extended period of time. The mission is also increasing the capabilities of the Navy should it be called upon to use force in the Taiwan Strait. The deployment will have given it firsthand experience of other navies at work, during which commitment we can expect that intelligence will have been collected and analyzed back in Beijing. Yes, China is helping fight piracy in international waters and appears to be doing a good job. But the battle it is gearing up for is still in the future - and much closer to home."

D) "US- Chinese Contacts Are Imperative for Military"

Richard Halloran, a Hawaii-based freelance writer, opined in the pro-independence, English-language "Taipei Times" [circulation: 30,000] (3/17):

"A touch of irony surfaced when a US destroyer patrolling the South China Sea sailed to the aid of the US ocean surveillance ship Impeccable after it was harassed by three Chinese government vessels and two trawlers. ... This confrontation, however, was far more than a skirmish at sea. It has turned into an early test for US President Barack Obama, who is scheduled to meet Chinese President Hu Jintao at the G20 economic summit meeting in London next month. Sino-US military relations are certain to be on the agenda.

"A question being addressed in Pacific Command headquarters above

Pearl Harbor is whether political authorities in Beijing ordered the assault or if the People Liberation Army (PLA) mounted it independently. ... The educated consensus holds that Beijing authorized the confrontation as it was conducted deliberately and timed to test the new US president. ..."

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